

# Labor As A Labyrinth

by Denise Reynolds



—LOVING ARMS—  
CHILDBIRTH SERVICES

In a standard approach to birth we are taught to think of labor as a straight line, like a train track with stations every mile where certain things will occur. If these certain things fail to occur at each station or it takes longer to get to a particular station, labor is considered “dysfunctional”. Additionally, there is the notion that when we get to the last station, the journey is over. If, instead of a straight line, we consider labor as a labyrinth, a whole new set of possibilities emerges. Here, all of labor is functional, and time and progress do not follow a straight line or schedule. The birth of a child brings a woman to the core of her being and to the core of the labyrinth. Once there, she begins another journey as she finds herself a changed woman and a new mother.

A labyrinth, like labor, can appear confusing and overwhelming if we try to anticipate from the beginning where all the twists and turns will occur. The beauty of the labor labyrinth is that we do not need a map; we need only follow the path the body already knows, surrendering to what comes up along the way. Unlike mazes, which have side paths leading to dead ends, the labyrinth has only one path where every step, no matter how small, leads on closer to the center. Similarly, each woman’s unique labor path leads to that which her body or baby requires. As baby journeys with mother, he follows a labyrinth of his own, following and responding to the cues along the way.

In ancient labyrinths, the corners were resting places or areas where sacred symbols were located. The labyrinth of labor also has “corners” where the body communicates that it needs a change or must move along more slowly. Rather than being a sign of dysfunction, or a signal to intervene, this is a time to listen. These corners can be restorative pauses to build endurance, nourish the body, or meditate.

When labor begins, a woman enters the labyrinth of labor full of excitement and anticipation. She feels energized and goes swiftly along the path, dilating the first few centimeters quickly. She goes through a few hairpin turns that throw her off but she soon recovers and continues down the path. At times it looks like she must be close to the end, then suddenly the labor labyrinth veers sharply out in a direction that feels like she is being pulled further from her objective. She gets coaching and support, and she makes decisions. She trusts herself and this process that has been occurring for millions of years and keeps going.

The path of the labyrinth goes through a tunnel and the world feels very dark. She stumbles over obstacles in the way. The walls of the labyrinth seem to be getting higher and narrower and it feels more difficult to continue. So, she listens and moves slowly, giving her body what it needs. She gives up what she thought to be true, she gives up how things are supposed to be and surrenders to the unknown, letting things be how ever they will be. She sheds her masks along the way, dropping them in the path behind her because they serve no purpose here.

Then, just when the path seems to be drawing her farther from her goal, the next turn brings her swiftly towards the end. The turns become tighter and appear more quickly but the goal is within reach and soon she is giving birth. She has reached the center of the labyrinth. She has birthed the way her body and baby needed to give birth.

Mother may dwell in the center for awhile, but at some point will begin the restorative journey out of the labyrinth. This transition, recognized by some cultures as a resting period of 40 days or more, helps to prepare women emotionally and physically to mother their children. In our fast-paced, multi-task world, a new mother is lucky to have a few weeks of rest. It is essential that we all recognize this transition from maiden to mother or mother-of-one to mother-of-two so that moms can allow themselves the time and space needed to make this passage. She needs to honor the incredible journey she has experienced and the ways it has changed her. She needs the opportunity to retrace the steps of her labor, to acknowledge what she left behind and to accept what she learned about herself and the universe. She needs to spend time with her baby, building confidence in her

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mothering instincts. Though the journey may be weeks or months and fraught with challenges, she will emerge with new understanding, strength and confidence.

Try experiencing the labyrinth as birth art. Find a labyrinth and trace a large version onto poster board. Glue string down on the lines and decorate with paints or pastels. Place a finger at the start, and follow the labyrinth with closed eyes. Notice how the finger can find the way even when the path is not visible. Think about the ways in which this relates to birth and how it feels to let go of knowing in advance, the physical and emotional depths that will be experienced.



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"Labor as a Labyrinth is a Birthing From Within concept developed by Pam England, author of [Birthing From Within](#)